

Jacobin’s “Socialism in Our Time Conference”: The politics of demoralization in service of the Democratic Party

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Jacobin magazine, the most prominent publication linked to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), held a conference in New York City under the banner “Socialism in Our Time” on September 13 to mark its 15th anniversary. The event, which drew around 200 participants, epitomized the moods of pessimism, demoralization, and political paralysis promoted by the DSA to serve a specific political function: to channel opposition to inequality and war back behind the Democratic Party, of which the DSA is a faction.

Throughout the course of the 10-hour gathering, *Jacobin* offered scarcely any appraisal of the political situation in the United States. Instead of clarifying the scale of the crisis or outlining a perspective for struggle, the conference sought to cultivate resignation and lower expectations.

The conference’s disconnect from the political and social crisis in the United States was epitomized in a panel titled, “Is there a social democratic road to socialism?” In his opening remarks, *Jacobin* contributor Paul Heideman dismissed the idea that crises in capitalism create opportunities for socialist revolution, declaring, “It turns out that the social structure of capitalism is actually not very unstable. It’s actually quite stable.”

“Democratic capitalism in particular is an extraordinarily stable social system, viewed in the long run of human history,” Heideman declared. “State collapse of the kind that was necessary for the Russian Revolution, for the Chinese Revolution, is all but unheard of in democratic capitalist societies.”

Heideman’s statement about the “extraordinary stability” of “democratic capitalism,” which went unchallenged, came as the Trump administration was preparing to exploit the killing of Charlie Kirk in order to sanctify a fascist agitator as a national hero, criminalize opposition and dismantle the last remnants of constitutional government.

No panelists addressed the significance of the Trump administration—its deployment of the military in US cities, fascistic campaign against immigrants and open rejection of constitutional limits—or the deeper processes driving the collapse of democratic rule: unprecedented inequality, America’s declining global position, massive debt, the breakdown of postwar alliances and the acceleration of war, including genocide in Gaza and conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

On its pages, *Jacobin* carries out a continuous cover-up of the

Trump administration’s actions. It has published nothing on the fascist rally held over the weekend as a memorial for Kirk. The reality of dictatorship must be denied because *Jacobin* is irreconcilably opposed to what flows from this reality: the necessity for a revolutionary response.

For the upper-middle-class layers that dominate *Jacobin*, the impossibility of socialism, infused with utter complacency, is an absolute premise of their politics. In the opening session, *Jacobin* co-founder Bhaskar Sunkara joked that when he first joined the DSA it felt like the end of the movement. His DSA mentor, David Duhalde, recalled the prevailing outlook as one of “no alternative to neoliberalism.”

The subsequent growth of the DSA, they explained, was largely a “happy accident” of Bernie Sanders labeling himself a democratic socialist and nearly winning the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016, though Duhalde stressed that the DSA’s integration into the Sanders campaign allowed them to capitalize on opposition once Trump took office.

In a later panel, *Jacobin* editor Micah Utrecht admitted that he could not even imagine DSA member Zohran Mamdani winning the Democratic primary for mayor of New York City, until the moment Andrew Cuomo finally conceded.

Perhaps the clearest expression of the prevailing outlook that day came from *Jacobin* and *Left Notes* writer Neal Meyer, who told the audience: “I apologize to the organizers of the conference who gave the conference a very optimistic title, ‘Socialism in Our Time.’ I think the gist of what we’re all saying is that the title should actually be something like, ‘Socialism at Some Point in the Future, Question Mark.’ We probably wouldn’t get as many people here, but it might have been more intellectually honest.”

Later in the discussion, Meyer returned to the theme that socialism is a distant, unattainable goal. “We don’t know how many hundreds of years might go by until we enter into a different economic order,” he said.

The notion that socialism lies centuries in the future, if it comes at all, did not prevent *Jacobin* from convening a panel titled, “The Blueprint: Socialism after Capitalism.” Panelist Ben Burgis defended the drawing up of such utopian schemes, even if never realized, as a way to persuade people of socialism’s desirability. Yet even in this exercise, the panelists could not imagine socialism beyond the framework of minor reforms, relying on the “tools that

Keynesianism gave us.”

The combination of these two seemingly contradictory ideas—that socialism is off the table for the foreseeable future and that it is nonetheless necessary to draw up a plan for socialism—is not unique to *Jacobin* and follows a definite logic. WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North, in a polemic written two years before *Jacobin*’s founding, explained:

The task of the Marxist movement was not to spur the workers on with the mirage of an illusory utopia, but, rather to develop, within the advanced sections of the working class, a scientific understanding of history as a law-governed process, a knowledge of the capitalist mode of production and the social relations to which it gives rise, and an insight into the real nature of the present crisis and its world-historical implications... This conception is opposed by those ‘who see no basis for socialism in the objective conditions created by capitalism itself, who have been demoralized by the experience of defeats and setbacks, and who neither understand the nature of the capitalist crisis nor perceive the revolutionary potential of the working class...’

Jacobin, which advertised its conference with a poster of Karl Marx, is in fact bitterly hostile to Marxism, particularly to its founder’s insistence that the working class organize itself independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie. For *Jacobin* and the DSA, there is no crisis of capitalism and therefore no objective basis for socialism, and *certainly* no need to mobilize the working class in opposition to the Democratic Party and the ruling class.

This role of channeling leftward-moving sentiment into the dead end of the Democratic Party was most clearly expressed in the panel titled, “Municipal Socialism and Its Limits: The Mamdani Moment in New York City.”

With Zohran Mamdani poised to become mayor of New York in November, the DSA will likely have one of its own leading the largest city in the country and the center of global finance capital. Mamdani won support on pledges to confront the affordability crisis and on the popular rejection of the pro-corporate Democratic establishment and its capitulation to Trump. But since securing the Democratic nomination in June, he has gone out of his way to reassure the party leadership and the corporate and financial elite that he can be trusted to serve their interests—a clear indication of what is to come in January and beyond.

The unstated premise of the *Jacobin* panel was acceptance of the central fraud of Mamdani’s campaign, that the Democratic Party can be transformed into a vehicle for the working class, while justifying Mamdani’s capitulations on the grounds of the supposed weakness of the left.

Jacobin contributor and labor studies academic Eric Blanc said that, ideally, the DSA would have spent decades building up a base before taking executive power. In the present circumstances, however, the task is to “reverse engineer a mass movement,” with Mamdani providing the impulse for a mass movement, which in

turn would give Mamdani the political room to enact his agenda.

The aim of such a mobilization, Blanc said, would be to pressure the Democratic Party establishment: “Unless they’re worried about getting voted out of office, they won’t implement these policies and vote on his [Mamdani’s] agenda.”

The need to restrain growing opposition was a common theme of the panel, underscoring *Jacobin*’s treacherous political role. Utrecht declared that “we need a left that is mature enough to not turn on Mamdani” after the election. Karen Narefsky, chief of staff for New York State Assemblymember and DSA member Phara Souffrant Forrest, stressed that “it’s imperative for us to figure out how to handle big conflicts and tensions between our elected officials and organizations like the DSA.” She added, “The response cannot just be to shitpost on Twitter. It doesn’t work. We can’t squander this moment.”

The DSA and *Jacobin* are consciously working to block workers and youth from drawing the necessary political conclusions. They insist there is no viable break with the Democratic Party, even as, in Narefsky’s words, it is “an existential question that Mamdani not succeed” for the party establishment. For the Democrats, Mamdani’s role is to channel opposition behind the Democratic Party; *Jacobin* and the DSA present this as proof there is still “room” for a political struggle within the party.

This is a total fraud that must be repudiated. *Jacobin*’s program is tailored at every point to the interests of the affluent upper middle class. Its perspective is to chain workers and youth to the Democratic Party, paralyze opposition and ensure that no genuine struggle against capitalism and dictatorship develops.

As the Socialist Equality Party statement on Saturday stressed, “The Democrats, the unions and the media cultivate the myth of an all-powerful government while insisting that nothing can be done. This is a lie. What is lacking is not mass opposition but, rather, a political strategy to guide and organize the struggle against Trump’s assault on democratic rights... Our program is not for the pessimists, the skeptics and the demoralized, but for the fighters among workers, students, youth, professionals, artists and intellectuals. There is no time to lose.”



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